

THE MUSIC OF THE NEW MEXICAN MATACHINES DANCE

by Claude Stephenson, State Folklorist

Following our recent successful Matachines dance gathering in May, I have had many queries about the music that accompanied the different groups that performed. I think the topic merits some discussion and would be relevant to both those who attended and those who could not. Jack Loeffler wrote an essay about the music for our program booklet, but there are a few more pieces to the puzzle that I would like to add to the mix.

Jemez Pueblo Matachines, Danzante



When I first started playing violin for the Bernalillo Matachines, I did not think much about the music other than the fact that it seemed different and strange to my ear, which had been trained in the prevalent Western European genres. I had heard the repertoire of a few other groups and noted similarities, but did not have the inclination to study it further until one fall evening driving home from a music festival in southern Colorado.

The previous weekend had been spent at the Border Folk Festival in El Paso where I had the opportunity to witness a Tarahumara Matachines group from Mexico. Their version of the dance and its music were very different from Bernalillo, but there was this one part in the middle that was almost exactly the same. It was the segment of the dance where the Monarca raises up the dancers two-by-two until they are all dancing together. The accompanying three-quarter-time melody was quite familiar, although the Tarahumara musicians played a simpler and much slower version than Bernalillo.

Listening to my car radio a week later, I heard an obvious variant of the same tune on a station from Alamosa, Colorado. Not only that, but many of the other tunes played were variants on the Bernalillo melodies I was familiar with. The announcer came on and said that we had been listening to Matachines music from Picuris Pueblo. The question then dawned on me, "How did this tune get from the mountains of Mexico to the Sangre de Cristos via Bernalillo?" And then, "Are there other tunes that these groups share and, if so, where did they come from and how did they get there?"

Like most of the mysteries surrounding Matachines, I have never found a definitive answer, but after much study I can conclude that the Matachines music played by the musicians accompanying the dance groups in northern and central New Mexico all came from one central source. The three-quarter-time melody that accompanies what I call the Monarca's dance is the most prevalent. It is played by all New Mexican groups except for Tortugas, but there are also other shared tunes. There is a tune for the dance segment that is varyingly called *La Patadita* (little kick) or *Zapateado* (shoe stamping) that is universal to all but Tortugas as well.

The Toro dance melody is shared by all who perform this segment, although it is played in varying time signatures of 2/4, 4/4, and 6/8. From this point forward, there are other tunes that are shared, but the names change along with the part of the dance it accompanies.

For example, all of these groups have a segment called *La Cruz* (the cross) and many of them share variants of the same melody, but others play the "Cruz" tune for a segment sometimes called the *Cambiada* (change) or *La Mudanza* (mixing) and vice versa. There is a Malinche melody often performed in a medley of tunes where one can hear an echo of the roots of that are commonly shared, but the tempo and structure vary quite widely. There are other tunes that are shared by only two or three different groups.

No one knows how long these dances have been accompanied by these tunes, but we can establish that the violin did not exist in New Mexico prior to about 1600. If the dance was accompanied by this music before that time, it had to have been played on different instruments. As the Pueblos of New Mexico were not known to have melodic instruments other than small flutes and/or conch shell trumpets before the arrival of the Spanish, it has been assumed that if the dance was being practiced here earlier, it was likely accompanied by percussion instruments and possibly voice.

My current guess is that the music we hear today probably had its New Mexican genesis in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries when violins and guitars became more commonly available in small communities around the state. However, where it came from and how it got here no one really knows, and its exact origin may never truly be established.

I have surmised that some of the musicians who accompanied the Matachines dances likely also played for community *bailes*

(dances) and, whenever these musicians gathered, they shared their latest repertoire additions with each other, much as folk musicians do today. Because it was an aural tradition, each musician varied the tunes to their own abilities, ears, memories, and tastes when they returned home and performed them.

This explanation has been used to account for the many community variations on commonly collected New Mexican dance tunes from this period, such as



Jemez Pueblo Matachines, Abuelo

La Varsoviana (the Young Girl from Warsaw) and *El Vaquero* (the Cowboy) and I would hazard that the same would hold true for the melodies of the Matachines we still hear being played today.

For more information, read Jack Loeffler's essay about Matachines music in our program booklet available for download on our website www.nmarts.org/matachines/essays.php.